

# Insights From The Brand Advocacy Summit 2025,

In conversation with Kurt Geiger, Free Soul,  
Tropic Skincare, Umberto Giannini,  
JD Sports, Frankly, and more.

**Presented by the Building  
Brand Advocacy podcast.**



# Introduction

Brand Advocacy Isn't a tactic.

**It's the Future of Growth.**

That's how the day opened at the Brand Advocacy Summit: London 2025 – with a call to rethink what marketing really means in today's world.

Hosts of the Building Brand Advocacy podcast, Verity Hurd & Paul Archer, shared how most brands are still building for sales, and using short-term wins to get there.

The strongest brands, though? They're playing the long game. They're not just building audiences, they're building belonging.

**In the words of Paul:**

***"Marketing isn't what you say. It's who you are."***

What followed was a breakdown of the five principles behind Advocacy-first growth; shared not as theory, but as patterns observed across hundreds of the world's best brands:

- **Start with Purpose:** Anchor everything in your "why".
- **Design Remarkable Experiences:** Make every touchpoint memorable, emotional, and shareable.
- **Empower Employees:** Advocacy starts inside a business.
- **Build Customer Communities:** Connect people to each other, not just the product.
- **Amplify Advocates:** Creators, superfans, employees and loyalists – make them the loudest voices.





Advocacy is not just a nice-to-have. The smartest brands are already tracking its ROI.

**It's measurable. Trackable. Actionable.**

Performance and brand are no longer separate conversations, or at least they shouldn't be.

And in 2025, the most powerful media channel isn't paid.

It's people.

Creators, customers, employees, and superfans now drive more reach, trust, and influence than traditional ad spend ever could.

But influence without accountability isn't enough.

That's why leading brands are embracing new ways to grow through Brand Advocacy in action.

So, Paul shared a new framework for measuring Advocacy: Gross Advocacy Value. A metric that captures the combined impact of affiliate performance, earned media, creator content, community engagement, and organic reach.

**Because in a world where attention is fragmented and trust is earned, who shares your story matters more than how often you buy space to tell it.**

This report breaks down the biggest learnings, frameworks, and future-focused takeaways from the Summit, across experience, discovery, decentralised communities, Gen Z engagement, and platforms you can't skip sharing to.

Let's get stuck in...



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Building Brand  
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Verity Hurd



Co-Host

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Lucy Murray



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Emily Mitchell



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## Insight #1 –

# Cultivating Brand Love: The Truth About Community in 2025 & Beyond

“Community” might be one of the most overused buzzwords in marketing, but it’s still one of the least understood.

That’s how Verity opened this panel, and it set the tone for what followed: a tactical, honest conversation about what real brand community looks like today. Not just followers. Not just loyalty programmes. But shared identity, emotional connection, and meaningful moments that happen beyond the screen.

### We heard from:

 **Lucy Murray**  
(Brand Director @ Free Soul)

 **Emily Mitchell**  
(Marketing Director @ Tropic Skincare)

 **Paul Hickey**  
(Group Director @ SAMY Alliance)

*“Community is feeling like you're a part of something.*

*If you think of your community, of your friends, your family, you feel part of something. So how can your brand be the thing that brings people together in a more authentic and engaging way?*

*It's easy to think of a WhatsApp community or an Instagram broadcast channel or your CRM subscribers, but actually; the community piece is the part of feeling like you belong somewhere. That's really important.”*

**Emily Mitchell,**  
Marketing Director @ Tropic Skincare





*"I think about it in like three different parts.*

*So customers first and foremost, which I think is ironically the one that everyone actually forgets about. But customers, and then all kind of influencers and creators. And then I think about, (with) events and activations, people who would come in person. It's not one thing, that's both in real life and online"*

**Lucy Murray,**  
Brand Director @ Free Soul



*"Community, at its core, is people who are bound by a common interest. What everyone forgets is that it's become such a, "hey, here's a group of people we can sell to", versus being like, "how are we actually connecting people?". And the offline piece is so critical for bringing those people on that journey."*

**Paul Hickey,**  
Group Director @ Samy Allicance



## **Key Insight #1: Community isn't measured in numbers. It's built on meaning.**

Brands often confuse scale with connection. But the most successful communities aren't the biggest, they're the most tightly bonded.

**"As soon as you get lost in the numbers, it's no longer a community, it's a numbers game."**

**Lucy Murray,**  
Brand Director @ Free Soul

The strongest brand communities aren't built on likes or numbers. They're built on meaning, shared values, rituals, and emotional connection.

That's what separates an audience from a true community.

And that's a trap too many brands still fall into.

Growing a community doesn't mean inflating headcount in a Slack channel or measuring comments. The most successful brands are getting clearer on not just who their community is, but what unites them.

The shift is clear: demographics are no longer enough. Shared beliefs, rituals, emotional needs, are what bring people together in a way that lasts.

When Free Soul built their community, Lucy started by identifying what united their audience emotionally, not just what they bought.

**“They were women who wanted to look after themselves.”**

This aligns with growing data across consumer behavior. 81% of people say trust is a top driver in purchasing decisions, and trust is built through consistent emotional resonance, not sheer scale.

Brands that win at community don't just “host” a group, they give it purpose. They understand that belonging is not a KPI, it's a feeling.

**As Lucy shared:**

**“We did an event for 400 people. But my favourite? The 15-person retreat where we actually listened to our customers. That's what created real loyalty.”**

## Tactical Takeaways:

- **Map your community by mindset, not market size.** Start by identifying shared beliefs, not age or job title. What values or ambitions unite your customers emotionally?
- **Build culture, not content.** Rituals and recurring community moments, like run clubs, drop-ins, or micro-events. Create a sense of shared identity and belonging. Think small but frequent, not just big and branded.
- **Give your people a role.** Empower community members to contribute, through co-created events, content, or UGC initiatives. It's not just about engagement. It's about ownership.
- **Track the right signals.** If you're measuring “likes” over lasting connection, you're missing the point. Look for:
  - Return attendance at IRL events.
  - Referrals or word-of-mouth.
  - UGC that mirrors your values, without being asked.
- **Design for depth, not virality.** Community should be felt before it's seen.



## Key Insight #2: IRL matters. Offline space creates lasting connection.

Too many brands think community lives on a feed. But as Paul Hickey reminded us, “the most powerful communities now live off-the-grid”. That means gyms, wellness studios, living rooms, coffee shops, and more.

These “third spaces” aren’t just places; they’re emotional hubs where belonging is built, not just liked online.

Digital-first brands often over-index on engagement metrics, and underinvest in physical environments that actually bring people together. But when brands show up offline in meaningful, non-transactional ways, they unlock something deeper than impressions. They create memory, which is the foundation of loyalty.

### Lucy put it simply:

**“There’s no point throwing money at events if you don’t know who you’re doing them for, and why.”**

Free Soul built its community from the ground up with real-world activations, starting with seven women in a run club. Now? Their hot/cold wellness sessions book up in under 10 minutes.

Community isn’t a virtual stat, it’s a felt sense of shared presence. And brands that foster that offline intimacy win longer-term.

Community is emotional, and people build emotion through experience. If you’re only building connection through comment sections, you’re missing a huge opportunity.

***“Please just remember that your customers are human beings.***

***They’re human beings with feelings, and heart.***

***Talk to them, speak to them, touch them, get in the room with them, and listen to them.”***

**Emily Mitchell,**  
Marketing Director @ Tropic Skincare



## Tactical Takeaways:

- Map your "third spaces". Where does your audience gather outside the feed? Identify physical spaces that matter to them and show up there with purpose.
- Create repeatable rituals. Host low-lift IRL moments (like Free Soul's run clubs or wellness studios) that become part of your community's lifestyle, not just one-off stunts.
- Budget for community, not just campaigns. IRL experiences aren't "nice to have", they're core to building trust. Allocate a line item in your marketing budget for offline engagement, not just ad spend.
- Make your values tangible. Use physical space to express what your brand stands for. That could be as simple as co-hosting panels with aligned partners or building brand rituals into real-life events.





## Key Insight #3: Purpose builds loyalty, but product earns attention.

Emily Mitchell, Marketing Director  
@ Tropic Skincare, made it plain:

**“Is purpose what makes people buy?  
Our research says no, it’s not.”**

And the data backs her up. While 63% of consumers say they prefer to buy from brands that align with their values, the final purchase decision still hinges on product performance, value, and trust.

In other words, purpose doesn’t convert. Product does. But purpose is what keeps people around.

That flips the classic brand pyramid on its head. The product gets you in the door, but the values you stand for are what get people to stick, stay, and share.

**“People buy the product based on the reviews, the five-star ratings, the awards. They realise it’s great, and then they fall in love with the brand.”**

**Emily Mitchell**  
Marketing Director @ Tropic Skincare

This is a reminder to brand builders: don’t build Advocacy around slogans. Build it into the product experience first. Then let your purpose give people a reason to belong.

## Tactical Takeaways:

- **Lead with quality.** Your community strategy won’t work if your product doesn’t. Build loyalty loops around a genuinely good product experience.
- **Bring values to life post-purchase.** Use packaging, loyalty touchpoints, surprise-and-delight, and UGC moments to reinforce your mission once the customer is already inside the brand.
- **Think retention, not acquisition.** Use your purpose to build emotional buy-in over time, so customers not only return, but become Advocates.



## Key Insight #4: It's not what your community says to your face. It's what they say when you're not in the room.

The most revealing moments of community aren't in the comments. They're in the group chats, the DMs, the whispered product recommendations, and the honest critiques.

### As Paul put it:

**"It's nice to know if people like you, but it's really about what they say when you're not in the room."**

This is where real Brand Advocacy lives; not in tracked UGC or structured referrals, but in the unscripted moments that happen when you're not watching.

And it's why brands need to listen beyond the surface. Not for sentiment analysis, but for signals: Are your customers recommending you? Defending you? Critiquing you with care?

If they are, that's not a red flag, it's proof they care enough to want you to be better.

The same goes for content, campaigns, and community programmes. If they're not built from a place of mutual value, they won't drive belonging. And belonging is what drives Advocacy.

### Tactical Takeaways:

- Rethink what "listening" means. It's not about brand mentions, it's about recognising patterns in what people share with each other when you're not tagged.
- Measure unprompted Advocacy. Track unsolicited testimonials, organic UGC, and off-platform community activity (WhatsApp, Reddit, niche forums).
- Encourage honest critique. Create safe spaces for feedback and respond without defensiveness. A brand people challenge is a brand people care about.
- Embed community feedback into strategy. Let unfiltered customer language shape your brand messaging, onboarding flows, and product roadmap.



## Insight #2 –

# The Rise of Social Search

This session was hosted with...

 **Beth Thomas**

(Director of Social Operations @ Frankly)

...unpacked what social search means, why it matters, and how to actually optimise for it.

It was part strategy breakdown, part SEO call-to-action and full of tactics your team can implement right now. Your brand's next customer isn't scrolling, they're searching, and if your content can't be found, it won't be seen.

## Key Insight #1: If you're not built for search, you might as well not exist.

Social search isn't new, but most brands still treat it like an afterthought. Beth says:

**“23% of users search within the first 30 seconds of opening TikTok. If your content isn't indexed for that behaviour, it won't be seen.”**

TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are absorbing the kind of intent-based searches that used to go straight to Google.

That's a seismic shift; and one many brands are missing, because they're still designing content for their followers, not for search engines. Social isn't just about scroll-stopping anymore. It's about search-surfacing.

## Tactical Takeaways:

- Work with SEO teams, not separately from them. Beth challenged the silos between SEO and social: “These teams need to be working so much closer together in businesses.
- Use tools like Google Trends and TikTok Creator Search Insights. Identify high-volume, evergreen search queries and turn those into content.
- Prioritise discoverability over aesthetics. If TikTok doesn't know what your content is about, it won't know where to show it.

## Key Insight #2: Fast content builds buzz. Slow content builds brand equity.

Most brands are still chasing engagement. But smart brands are now designing content at two distinct speeds, because not all content serves the same role.

Beth introduced a tactical framework for today's landscape:

Fast vs. Slow Organic.

### Fast content:

- Is punchy, emotional, and built for the scroll. Think TikTok trends, stitch replies, viral formats. It's all about visibility, repetition, and landing quick wins within a 7-day window. This is your reach and relevance layer.

### Slow content:

- Is thoughtful, educational, and built-for-search. Think "how to apply vitamin C serum," "best trainers for wide feet," or "travel essentials for solo trips." These are search-led discovery assets, SEO in social form. They don't need to pop on Day 1. They're designed to compound over time.

**"You don't need content to go off on Day 1,"**  
Beth said.

**"You need it to show up when people are searching in six months."**

It's a mindset shift.

From chasing views to building pipelines.





## Tactical Takeaways:

- Run your social like a content portfolio. Balance fast-turn reactive with slow-burn discoverable. If your grid is full of memes but missing search-led content, you're invisible to a whole segment of users.
- Map by funnel, not format. Fast = top of funnel (awareness, talkability) Slow = mid-funnel (education, consideration) Treat them as different jobs with different KPIs.
- Write briefs with this model. For creators, partners, and in-house teams, specify whether you need fast-reactive or slow. Include keyword themes, tone, and intent.
- Invest in slow content for longevity. Beth's example; a well-optimised TikTok about "best beer gardens in London" won't rank for a weekend, it'll surface every summer.
- Build slow content libraries now before social search becomes pay-to-play. TikTok's paid search ads are rolling out. What ranks organically today may cost you tomorrow.

## Key Insight #3: Good content doesn't rank. Indexed content does.

Brands often ask: "Why didn't this video land?"

**"Because TikTok didn't know what it was about.**

**If the platform doesn't know how to categorise your content, it won't know where to send it, or who to show it to."**

### **Beth Thomas**

*Director of Social Operations @ Frankly*

Welcome to the world of indexing, the foundation of content discovery through social search.

Platforms like TikTok and YouTube aren't just looking for aesthetics or engagement signals. They're parsing your metadata, audio, captions, and even your spoken words to decide what your video is about.

That means if you want your content to show up when people search for “how to use retinol” or “best running shoes for flat feet,” you need to give the algorithm exactly the right signals.

Beth’s test?

**“Check the suggested search terms on your TikTok post. If they’re wrong, or missing entirely, TikTok has no idea what your video is. And that video is probably stuck in view jail.”**

## Tactical Takeaways:

- Think like a search engine. Every post should tell the platform what it’s about, clearly, repeatedly, and across multiple data layers.
- Watch the “recommended search” under your video. That’s TikTok’s indexing preview, as Beth explains. If it doesn’t match your intent, revise the post.
- Use indexing in creator briefs. Ask creators to use specific keywords out loud, in captions, and in hashtags. Otherwise, even great content can get buried.

- Nail your metadata stack...

### – **Captions:**

Include clear keywords in natural language.  
Avoid cryptic one-liners.

### – **Hashtags:**

Use specific, searchable tags  
(e.g. #hairgrowthtips vs. #fyp).

### – **Audio:**

Either speak the keyword or use audio that already ranks under your theme.

### – **On-screen text:**

Repeat your main search phrase clearly  
in the first few seconds.

### – **Subtitles:**

Make sure they match what you’re actually saying.  
TikTok listens.

- Reframe how you measure success. If your video is optimised for discovery, views may come slowly, but they compound. Monitor performance over 30+ days, not just 48 hours.



## Insight #3 –

# The Experience-Driven Economy: How Experience-Led Strategies are Reshaping Consumer Connection

In a world where attention is fractured and digital fatigue is real, the most loved brands aren't shouting louder, they're showing up differently.

This live panel at the Summit brought together two industry leaders who are reshaping what it means to build brand loyalty through experience:

 **Pascale Montaner**

(Vice President, Global Marketing @ Kurt Geiger)

 **Louisa O'Connor**

(Managing Director @ Seen Presents)

Together, they unpacked why IRL isn't dead, it's more vital than ever.

## Key Insight #1: Experience is the new battleground for attention.

In today's hyper-connected world, every consumer is inundated with content. Brands are no longer competing with each other, but with all demands on a person's time.

*"We don't compete with brands anymore. We compete with people's attention, and time."*

**Pascale Montaner,**  
Vice President, Global Marketing  
@ Kurt Geiger



And in 2025, people are more selective than ever.

To capture attention, brands must offer experiences that provide genuine value and emotional depth. It's not about being louder; it's about being more meaningful.

Not everyone is showing up for product displays or campaign wrap parties. They're craving something that feels worth leaving the house for, something human.

But that only works if brands shift from performance marketing to presence marketing; showing up in the places, formats, and moments where people genuinely want to engage.

Kurt Geiger understood this early.

Their retail spaces aren't stores, they're sensory brand statements, designed to evoke emotion. Think stained-glass storefronts, mirrored installations, florals, and playlists.

**Pascale shared:**

**“You're not just convincing someone to shop, you're asking them to give you their time.**

**It's about emotional resonance.”**

### **Tactical Takeaways:**

- **Redefine the ROI of experience.** Track emotional impact, not just footfall.
- **Build with intention, not imitation.** Don't chase pop-up trends, build experiences rooted in your brand story.
- **Map your 'time-worthiness'.** What would actually make your customer choose you over everything else in their day?



## Key Insight #2: Brand experiences are an antidote to loneliness.

Despite being more connected digitally, many individuals, especially Gen Z, experience profound loneliness.

**Louisa made a powerful point:**

**“80% of Gen Z say they feel lonely. You can look popular online and still feel completely disconnected.”**

She's right. Community isn't found in a feed. It's built in physical space. And in a world of doomscrolling, brand activations can become modern gathering places.

Brands have an opportunity and perhaps a responsibility, to create spaces where people feel seen, heard, and connected.

When done right, IRL activations offer emotional relief, not just entertainment. They create micro-communities, identity alignment, and moments of belonging:

***“If someone walks into your space and sees people like them, feels your values, and feels safe, that's what makes them come back.”***

## Tactical Takeaways:

- **Design for emotion, not just Instagram.** Your experience should make someone feel seen, not just get seen.
- **Create spaces that build belonging.** Curate formats (wellness, panels, drop-ins) that bring like-minded people together.
- **Think beyond the one-off.** Build a ritual (run clubs, in-store talks) that fosters community over time.



## Key Insight #3: Digital fatigue is fuelling the IRL renaissance.

As digital fatigue sets in, consumers seek real-world experiences that offer a break from screens and virtual interactions.

**“To feed our addiction to digital, we need real-life moments. That’s the irony; social content performs better when it’s based on something that happened in the real world.”**

***Pascale Montaner,***

Vice President, Global Marketing @ Kurt Geiger

IRL isn't just a trend. People are craving contrast to their digital lives: touch, sound, space, emotion.

That’s why IRL content consistently over performs online: it has depth. It has memory. Physical experiences provide the sensory engagement that digital platforms lack, offering a refreshing and memorable brand interaction.

This is where brands can lead, by giving people experiences that become talkable because they’re tangible. And by designing content through experience, not just about it.

### Tactical Takeaways:

- Build content around presence. Create moments people naturally want to capture, not force them to.
- IRL should fuel digital, not follow it. Let your brand experiences become the editorial engine of your content calendar.
- Plan for post-moment storytelling. Think: behind-the-scenes, interviews on site, customer reactions, creator walk-throughs.



## Key Insight #4: Democratising brand experiences to build real Advocacy.

The most powerful brand experiences don't need velvet ropes. They need open doors. Yet, many brands still prioritise creators and influencers over the very people who built their business: their customers. That imbalance isn't just a missed opportunity, it's a breach of trust.

**“If someone's bought your product for 10 years but never gets an invite, and an influencer does, that sends the wrong message.”**

**Pascale Montaner,**  
Vice President, Global Marketing @ Kurt Geiger

Brands have spent years chasing social reach, often overlooking the most obvious path to organic growth: the people already showing up. When brands default to influencer-first experiences, they risk alienating the customers who actually care.

**This isn't just a brand-building problem, it's a brand trust problem.**

In the era of the Experience Economy, access is equity. Customers aren't just buying into what a brand sells, they're buying into what it stands for.

If Advocacy is the goal, your events, activations, and IRL moments need to reflect your values, not just your audience goals.

68% of consumers feel more loyal to a brand when they're included in product decisions, community initiatives, or invited to participate in brand experiences.

And UGC tied to in-person brand events has 2.3x higher engagement than typical influencer content. Because it's real. It's human. It's owned.

**For years, brand events have defaulted to exclusivity, but the best Advocacy is earned through inclusion.**

This isn't about abandoning influencers, it's about recognising that the most authentic Advocates often aren't posting because they're paid.

**They're posting because they care.**



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## Tactical Takeaways:

- **Recognise loyal customers.** Use CRM and community data to identify long-time or high-impact customers. Invite them to experiences, not just offer them discount codes.
- **Rethink “invitation-only”.** Use loyalty data, surprise-and-delight tactics, or opt-in waitlists to identify high-value customers, and give them access to branded experiences, not just discounts.
- **Capture Advocacy at the source.** Create content engines out of these moments. Invite customers to document, share, and co-create, not just attend.
- **Build rituals, not one-offs.** Pop-ups are powerful, but consistency creates loyalty. Whether it’s a monthly event or a quarterly drop-in, repetition builds belonging.

Real Advocacy doesn’t happen behind closed doors.

It happens when brands create spaces that feel worth showing up for and make sure the right people are on the guest list.

Let the people who believe in your brand live it with you. That’s how Advocacy scales.

*“It’s not about one-off pop-ups.*

*It’s about designing moments that move people and making your brand mean something in their real lives.*

*There’s a loneliness to the way we live now. People want to be part of something.*

*Brand experiences create that space where someone walks in and immediately feels, this is for me.”*


**Louisa O’Connor,**  
Managing Director @ SEEN Presents



## Insight #4 –

# The YouTube Evolution: What Brands Need to Know

This fireside chat featured...

 **Chloe McCullough**  
(YouTube Lead @ JD Sports  
& YouTube Consultant for brands like Sheerluxe).

Chloe broke down how she turned YouTube into JD's most valuable and community-led platform. She goes deep on its untapped brand potential, why it's still misunderstood, what success looks like, and how brands can treat it as more than a content dumping ground.

## Key Insight #1: YouTube isn't a platform. It's an ecosystem

Most marketers obsess over Instagram and TikTok, but YouTube is quietly becoming the most powerful all-in-one platform, dominating TV, streaming, podcasts, short-form content, and creator-led media, yet the most underused.

**"YouTube is the second most visited website in the world. If scale is one of your KPIs, this is where you need to be."**

*Chloe McCullough,  
YouTube Lead @ JD Sports*



YouTube is no longer a place to be seen. It's where your brand is discovered, explored, and remembered.

It's also the only platform with full-funnel capability: Shorts for fast discovery, long-form for education and trust, search for evergreen traffic, and community for depth.

In other words: it's not social, it's strategy.



**YouTube is not about going viral overnight. It's a long-term, search-drive platform where audiences discover, binge, and convert at scale.**

YouTube reaches more 18 to 49-year-olds than any US TV network, currently. It's winning time-spent battles across Gen Z and Gen Alpha, too. With YouTube TV, Shorts, Podcasts, and Live, it's the closest thing to an all-in-one discovery-to-loyalty ecosystem.

But most brands are still building for TikTok first.

This isn't just a visibility play. It's a strategic advantage hiding in plain sight. The brands winning on YouTube aren't treating it like a content dump – they're treating it like infrastructure; consistent, intentional, and built to grow over time.

So, how do you shift from passive presence to platform power?

### **Tactical Takeaways:**

- Treat YouTube as a content home. It's not a content repurposing zone. Act accordingly.
- Stop thinking campaign-first. Start thinking channel-first, and build from there.
- Build a consistent content cadence. Weekly is ideal, monthly at minimum.
- Use YouTube's backend to inform your whole content ecosystem. Top-performing search terms, thumbnails, watch time, and drop-off points are vital information for mastering content your Advocates want.

## Key Insight #2: Patience pays, because YouTube rewards consistency, not speed.

“Most brands give up after six weeks”,

Chloe said.

“But this platform rewards those who commit.”

Unlike TikTok or Instagram, YouTube isn't built for instant gratification. It's built for accumulation. Well-optimised videos gain visibility over time, surfacing in search, suggested feeds, and related videos long after the publish date.

This 'slow burn' effect is what makes YouTube different:

- ✓ **View windows don't expire, ever.**
- ✓ **Content doesn't disappear.**
- ✓ **And strategy matters more than speed.**

JD Sports leaned into this truth. They committed to building out episodic, consistent formats, and avoided the common trap of uploading one-off videos with no connective tissue. The result? YouTube became their most engaged channel, with a significantly higher value per view than any other platform.

### Tactical Takeaways:

- **Shift your time horizon.** Stop measuring YouTube like social. Treat each video like a compounding asset, not a disappearing Story.
- **Build 'anchor' content.** Create timeless, high-intent videos that can rank and retain (e.g. “How to Style Nike Dunks” or “Best Gym Bags 2024”) and layer in timely content as the support act.
- **Series = retention.** Episodic formats like interviews, reviews, challenges, or docu-style content create viewer habits. And habits = algorithmic trust.
- **Let the algorithm do its work.** Instead of pushing content, optimise for discovery:
  - keyword-rich titles.
  - clear, engaging thumbnails.
  - smart playlists.
  - intentional upload cadence.*(YouTube loves patterns.)*
- **Focus on AVD + CTR.** Forget views at first. Strong click-through rates (CTR) and average view duration (AVD) are what tell YouTube your content is worth showing more.

## Key Insight #3: Creators on YouTube aren't content producers, they're attention architects.

**“YouTube creators are expensive for a reason. They're not influencers, they're entertainers.”**

Brands often enter YouTube partnerships with a social media mindset, briefing creators like they're making 15-second ads. But YouTube creators aren't built for that.

They're trained to hold attention for 8, 12, 20+ minutes. That makes them more expensive, but infinitely more valuable for building audience trust, storytelling, and real brand equity.

For JD Sports, the most successful creator partnerships happened when the creators had autonomy to design the format, not just slot into the brand's campaign.

This led to long-form content with higher retention, more engagement, and a loyal returning audience, something rare in a scroll-first environment.

## Tactical Takeaways:

- Prioritise editorial alignment over aesthetic fit. You want creators whose audience overlaps values and intent, not just style. Who are they trying to reach, and how do they hold their attention?
- Let creators build the format. Instead of inserting your brand into a brief, ask: What's the episode that would work best on your channel that we can co-create?
- Use YouTube creators for depth, not just reach. They're not top-of-funnel. They're mid-to-bottom. Treat them like podcast hosts, documentary leads, or show runners, not banner ads.
- Build re-watchable content, not campaigns. Think: multi-episode drops, seasonal content, interviews, or co-hosted series. This creates habits. And it's habits that build loyalty.
- Measure more than impressions.

Look at:

- average view duration
- subscriber growth post-publish
- returning viewer rate
- comment sentiment and save/share metrics



## Key Insight #4: YouTube search is SEO in motion and most brands haven't caught up

“YouTube is Google in video form.”

Search is where YouTube really sets itself apart. It's not just a place to upload content, it's a searchable archive of brand relevance.

But if your videos aren't titled, tagged, and structured intentionally, they're practically invisible.

This is the biggest missed opportunity for most brands: their video content doesn't index properly, because they haven't aligned with their SEO or paid search teams, or worse, they're still chasing clicks with unclear, cutesy titles.

### Tactical Takeaways:

- Align your video and SEO teams, immediately. Pull your top-performing blog titles, most searched terms, and brand search queries. Build videos around those.

- Write for search, not cleverness.

Clear > cool. E.g.

✗ “Our new drop is live”

✓ “JD Sports Summer 2025 Collection | Best Picks”

- Build a title stack:
  - Primary keyword at the front.
  - Natural phrasing (what would I type into YouTube?).
  - Secondary hook or detail (e.g. “For Beginners”).
- Don't forget the backend:
  - Description (include 2–3 target keywords early).
  - Tags (use 5–8 focused tags max).
  - Captions (upload a transcript or edit auto-captions).
- Use tools like TubeBuddy, VidIQ or even Google Trends again. Identify evergreen search phrases and build your titles around them.

YouTube isn't just another content channel, it's the closest thing to owned attention a brand can build in 2025.

The brands that win aren't chasing views. They're building habits. With content that's searchable, bingeable, and built to last.

## Insight #5 –

# Gen Z Unfiltered: How to Build Brands They Actually Care About

This session brought together sharp minds from across beauty, community, and content strategy to unpack what really drives Gen Z's Advocacy today – beyond trends, virality, or aesthetics.

On the stage, guests learnt from...

🎤 **Lara Stallbaum**  
(Founder & CEO @ Twirl)

🎤 **Rosie Donoghue**  
(Digital Marketing Manager @ Umberto Giannini)

**Key Insight #1: Gen Z isn't just influencing culture, they're rewriting the rules of brand engagement.**

Forget what you know about generational marketing.

*"Gen Z shaped the way we consume content. What started with them is now influencing how Millennials, and even Gen X, engage with brands."*

**Lara Stallbaum,**  
Founder & CEO @ Twirl



From redefining what “authentic” content means, to shaping the way we search, shop, and share online, Gen Z has become the test market for cultural relevance. And their expectations are higher than any generation before them.

This generation doesn't wait to be marketed to. They research, interrogate, and co-create. They want brands to sound like people, not polished taglines. They reward consistency, not just trend-hopping. And they expect to participate, not just observe.

**“Gen Z is the generation doing the research. They’re not just scrolling, they’re seeking out brands they can connect with.”**

**Rosie Donoghue,**  
*Digital Marketing Manager @ Umberto Giannini*

What works for Gen Z today will become the benchmark for all audiences tomorrow. Their habits, from using TikTok as a search engine to demanding social proof via UGC, are influencing consumer expectations across every age group.

### **Tactical Takeaways:**

- **Reverse-engineer your brand experience.** Start by asking: Would a Gen Z customer feel seen in this campaign? Would they find it? Would they trust it?
- **Study their behaviours, not just their platforms.** Look beyond where Gen Z hangs out and focus on how they behave: research-driven, creator-first, community-minded.

- **Build for longevity, not virality.** Gen Z can spot inauthentic content in seconds. Build consistent brand rituals and values that show up everywhere, not just in trend-driven posts.
- **Let Gen Z teach your brand how to communicate.** If your brand voice only works on a billboard, it won’t resonate with Gen Z. Give creators room to shape it with you.





## Key Insight #2: Brand loyalty isn't dead. It just looks different now.

There's a narrative that Gen Z are brand hoppers, attention-poor, trend-chasing, loyalty-averse. But that's not what the data (or this panel) suggests. Gen Z isn't less loyal, they're just more selective about who earns it, and how it's maintained.

Rosie Donoghue shared how Umberto Giannini has built long-term relationships with Gen Z creators who genuinely love the brand:

**“Once they buy into a brand, they become lifelong advocates. But you have to meet them with consistency, and with a story.”**

That consistency has to show up across every touchpoint, not just in one-off launches or seasonal hype. Lara Stallbaum echoed that it's not a product or platform that builds loyalty.

**“You don't build loyalty from a single product. You build it through story, consistency, and values across every platform.”**

And when done right? Gen Z doesn't just buy. They stay, they share, and they show up. Because when a brand becomes part of their identity, Advocacy becomes instinctive.

## Tactical Takeaways:

- **Turn values into behaviour.** Gen Z isn't loyal to marketing, they're loyal to alignment. Make sure your values aren't just in your tagline, but in your customer experience, your creator partnerships, and your content.
- **Replace campaigns with consistency.** Advocacy doesn't come from a flash drop or a viral reel. It comes from showing up the same way across TikTok, email, retail, and post-purchase flows.
- **Think beyond “targeting.”** Create brand rituals Gen Z can participate in. Student pop-ups, IRL creator meetups, product seeding with values-aligned micro-communities.
- **Measure resonance, not just reach.** UGC, creator retention, opt-ins, and unsolicited shoutouts are signals Gen Z doesn't just see your brand, they believe in it.

## Key Insight #3: Authenticity isn't an aesthetic. It's a strategy built on trust.

Every brand wants to be “authentic.” But Gen Z isn't measuring that by whether your content looks raw, unfiltered, or lo-fi.

What they want is consistency. A clear point of view. A recognisable tone of voice. A sense that your brand actually knows who it is and sticks to it.

**“Authenticity isn't about ‘raw’ content anymore, it's about being recognisable. If I covered your logo, would I still know it's your brand?”**

**Lara Stallbaum,**  
*Founder & CEO @ Twirl*

The trap many brands fall into? Briefing creators like they're making mini TV ads. Polished visuals. Scripted lines. No creative autonomy. But Gen Z can feel the difference.

Real creators don't just make noise, they build trust, because they know how to talk to their audience in a way that lands.

Rosie said it clearly:

**“We don't force tone of voice. We choose creators who already sound like us, because they love the brand.”**

Authenticity isn't just about how something looks. It's how it feels. And when your creator strategy is aligned with your brand's values, that's when it starts to convert.

### Tactical Takeaways:

- Pick creators who already fit the brand. Don't “buy tone of voice” partner with people who already use your products and reflect your values.
- Write briefs that guide, not control. Give creators space to tell their story, not yours. A clear problem, product, and outcome is enough.
- Audit your content for consistency. Does your brand sound like the same person across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube? Or is it just chasing what works?
- Look for brand recognisability, not perfection. Use UGC and creator content to build emotional recall. Consistent visuals, recurring formats, and creator-first storytelling > studio polish.

## Key Insight #4: UGC isn't just content. It's the social proof Gen Z actually trusts.

For Gen Z, product pages don't build belief, real people do. If the only place your product is showing up is in your own branded content, it's not credible.

Gen Z expects to see it in the hands of people they trust, creators, communities, friends and they expect that content to be consistent across every channel.

**“UGC shouldn't just sit on Instagram. It should live across your customer journey, from the first ad to the product page.”**

**Rosie Donoghue,**  
*Digital Marketing Manager @ Umberto Giannini*

This generation isn't buying on impulse. They're searching. Watching. Cross-referencing. They want to know: What does it look like in use? What are people really saying? Why should I care?

And if your content isn't showing up in the moments that matter, in TikTok search, on YouTube, in the right creator's voice, they're gone.

## Tactical Takeaways:

- **Integrate UGC across the funnel.** Product page videos. Email flows. Retargeting ads. UGC should support every step of the journey, not just awareness.
- **Pair UGC with paid to test performance.** Run A/B tests against brand-led creative. Use metrics like CTR, time-on-page, and CVR to prove value.
- **Optimise UGC for search and discovery.** Make sure creators use keywords in captions, voiceover, and titles. It's not just content, it's indexable proof.
- **Brief creators with real-world use cases.** Think “how I use this before work” or “here's what no one tells you about this product” not just standard “what it is” explainers.

Gen Z don't follow linear paths from awareness to purchase. They discover your brand through a friend's video, check TikTok search, watch a YouTube review, skim your product page, and DM a creator to ask if it's worth it, all before adding to cart.



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# Building Brand Advocacy



The Building Brand Advocacy podcast unravels the secrets behind the top 1% of brands. Those cultivating communities, harnessing and empowering them to drive results at scale; propelling word-of-mouth and Advocacy.